

PSYCHOLOGY

Is more ethics training in general psychology better?

Renee' A. Zuccherro, Ph.D.
Mentor: Bob Ahuja, Ph.D. (Marketing)

Rationale

Training in ethics is fundamental to Jesuit education; but, ethics are infrequently discussed in courses other than theology and philosophy. One-fourth of Xavier undergraduates enroll in General Psychology (PSYC 101) at some time during their time at the University. Yet, ethics are infrequently addressed in undergraduate psychology courses and are most likely covered in advanced courses, such as research or practicum/internship, or at the graduate level. Nevertheless, ethical issues pervade roles of a psychologist, including researcher, practitioner, and teacher. Therefore, increased content in the area of ethics would expose an array of students to a key component of Jesuit education. Furthermore, future psychologists and consumers of psychological services might develop a better understanding of psychologists' ethical behavior.

The following **question** is posed: **"Are PSYC 101 students who are exposed to additional psychology ethics content more knowledgeable about psychology ethics at mid-semester than those who are not?"**

Method

Participants were students enrolled in four sections of PSYC 101 in the spring, 2008 semester. The prototypical participant was a 19 year-old, Caucasian, freshman female enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences. Notably, only six percent of participants had declared psychology as a major. Psychology majors might represent a larger percentage of the sample if this study occurred in the fall semester. Forty-four percent of participants had previously been enrolled in a psychology course, while 41% had previously been enrolled in an ethics course.

Procedures: Two PSYC 101 sections were exposed to a curriculum infused with ethics ($n= 49$), while two sections received the standard curriculum ($n= 52$). The author sought the assistance of two fellow Xavier psychology instructors to conduct this study. Nicholas Salsman, Ph.D. infused ethics content into the curriculum of the course section he taught and Julie Rowekamp, M.A. agreed for two course sections she taught to be used as the control group. This study was submitted to the Xavier University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and deemed exempt from IRB review.

Infusion of ethics occurred in the following course sections: careers in psychology (focused on the teaching of psychology), research, learning, social psychology, and clinical practice. Students were exposed to examples of a psychologist's ethical and unethical behavior throughout the course. Initially, the American Psychological Association (APA) code of ethics (2002) was presented to the students to serve as a foundation for future discussions. A specific focus was on the General Principles, which guide psychologists' behavior, but are aspirational in nature. Students were also presented with specific ethical standards when appropriate during the semester. Table 1 provides a description of the ethics content, including the course topics, specific subjects presented, and instructional methods used.

Measures: There were two measures utilized for this study. A 15 item multiple-choice achievement test was administered to participants. It was scored as the number of items correct (0 to 15). Three case studies were presented. Utilizing an open-ended response format, students identified the ethical issues and discussed how the situation could be more ethically resolved. Possible total case study scores ranged from 0 to 10. The achievement test and case studies were administered at the first class meeting (Pre-Test) and at mid-semester (Post-Test). Students were given 30 minutes in class to complete both measures.

Table 1
Ethics Content for General Psychology (PSYC 101)

Course Topic	Subject	Method(s) Used
Careers in Psychology/Teaching of Psychology	Teaching Competence, Evaluation of Students, General Beneficence, Allocation of Authorship Credit, Dual Relationships	Introduction of APA Code of Ethics, Classroom Discussion, Case Studies
Research	The Ethical Researcher, Use of deception, Informed & Voluntary Consent, Institutional Review Board (IRB)	Classroom Discussion, Case Studies
Learning	Unethical Research Practices (deception, authorship credit); Watson's Little Albert Case Study	Case Studies, Supplemental Reading, Video Clip, Classroom Discussion
Ethics Refresher	Ethics of research and teaching	Case studies, Small Group Discussion, Class Discussion
		Mid-semester post-test administered
Social Psychology	Ethics in social psychology research (Classic studies conducted by Zimbardo, Asch, Milgram), use of deception in social psychology, informed and voluntary informed consent, second-order [informed] consent, IRB	Classroom Discussion, Video Clip, Supplemental Reading
Clinical Practice	Confidentiality, Limits of Confidentiality, Tarasoff Case, Duty to Warn, Informed Consent, Boundaries, Multiple Relationships, Competence, Exceptions to Competence	Classroom Discussion, Case Studies, Small Group Discussion

Results

Statistical analyses revealed several interesting findings. First, students in the experimental group displayed greater understanding of ethical situations and how to resolve ethical situations than the control group at mid-term (case studies). However, there was no difference between the control and experimental groups on their basic knowledge of ethics at mid-term (the achievement test). In addition, students in the experimental group displayed greater knowledge of ethics, a greater understanding of ethical situations, and how to resolve these situations at the post-test (mid-term) when compared to the pre-test (beginning of the semester). Specifically, students in Zuccherò's course section displayed improvement on both the ethics achievement test and the case studies from pre-test to post-test, whereas students in Salsman's section did not display an improvement on either measure.

Discussion

Let us revisit the initial question, "Are PSYC 101 students who are exposed to additional psychology ethics content more knowledgeable about psychology ethics at mid-semester than those who are not?" The findings suggest that the increased presence of psychology ethics content in general psychology (PSYC 101) *may* result in increased student knowledge of psychology ethics. The

findings also suggest that the increased psychology ethics content *may* result in an increased ability to recognize unethical behavior and a better understanding of ethical behavior of psychologists.

The author describes these findings in a tentative manner, due to the observed differences in the experimental group sections at post-test (mid-term). Zuccherro's experimental section displayed significantly improved outcomes on both measures at post-test, while Salsman's experimental section did not. Moreover, Zuccherro's section displayed significantly higher case study scores at post-test than Rowekamp's and Salsman's course sections.

There are a few possible explanations for the observed differences between the experimental sections. First, students in Zuccherro's course section completed ethics take home essay questions for tests one and two, while students in Salsman's section did not. The task of developing comprehensive essays related to ethics may have solidified the students' knowledge of the APA Ethics Code (2002) General Principles. Moreover, the essay question for test 2 required students to consider how they might conduct a flawed research study in a more ethical manner, similar to question 2 for each of the case studies. See Appendix A for the take home essay questions for tests 1 and 2.

Also, Zuccherro may have more successfully integrated the use of case studies into a "refresher ethics lecture" prior to the post-test (mid-term) than Salsman. Case studies were presented to exemplify ethical situations involved in teaching psychology and conducting psychological research. Students formed small groups and were instructed to review an assigned case study, identifying the violated ethical principles and areas of concern, as well as how the situation could be ethically resolved. After discussion, each group reported back to the class. Students in each group described their case study and the aforementioned points of interest. This sparked additional discussion among the class as a whole.

The post-test results presented in this paper were administered at mid-term, rather than the end of the semester. Between mid-semester and the semester's end, ethics content in the areas of social psychology and clinical practice will be presented to students in the experimental condition. The true post-test (at the semester's end) might be a more accurate measure of cumulative student learning of psychology ethics for the course. Thus, it is possible that at the end of the semester, students in Salsman's section may display an improvement in their knowledge of psychology ethics and understanding of ethical situations, due to additional exposure to psychology ethics.

Finally, there may be an inherent difference between the course section taught by Zuccherro and that taught by Salsman which cannot be controlled. That is, Zuccherro taught this course for five consecutive semesters prior to the study; whereas this study was conducted during the first semester Salsman taught this course. The differing levels of the instructors' experience may account for some observed inequities.

Teaching Implications

The infusion of ethics into general psychology increased the author's enjoyment of teaching the course, despite the significant commitment (time and energy) to modifying the course content. The students appeared better engaged and were genuinely interested in learning about psychology. In class, they quickly identified unethical behavior and were able to indicate why it was unethical. They clearly articulated changes in case study situations that would result in a psychologist's ethical behavior and research that would be more likely to adhere to current ethical standards. Students effectively completed the take home essay questions about ethics. However, such questions would be difficult to integrate into an in-class testing format due to the intricate detail required and the necessary time to effectively answer the questions. One disadvantage of take home essay questions was the considerable increase in time and effort required to score the answers. However, the increase in student engagement and learning were certainly worth the extra exertion.

The Future

Again, the current paper describes part of a study designed to assess the utility of integrating psychology ethics into general psychology. A true post-test (semester's end) will be administered to the control and experimental groups on the last teaching day of the semester. The experimental group scores are

expected to increase subsequent to the inclusion of additional ethics content. It is likely that the author will continue the infusion of ethics in general psychology in future semesters.

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Appendix A

Take Home Essay Questions for Zuccherò's General Psychology Section

Test 1 (Focused on ethics related to teaching psychology and conducting psychological research)

Discuss the general principles of the American Psychological Association (APA) Code of Ethics (APA, 2002). What behaviors would an ethical teacher of psychology display? What behaviors would an ethical psychology researcher display?

Test 2 (Focused on research ethics specific to a classic case study about learning/ classical conditioning)

We discussed Watson's "Little Albert" case study at great length in class. Discuss this experiment, including how it was conducted. On your own, consider the ethical issues surrounding this case. What ethical principles were violated and what is the basis for your answer? Knowing what you know about ethical behavior of psychology researchers, what was unethical about Watson's behavior in this case? Given the same set of circumstances, how would you conduct this study so that it would be conducted in an ethical manner? What were the implications of this study for the field of psychology?